



Eastertide in Germany

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EASTERTIDE IN GERMANY

Heaven, the bud-sower, shows a laughing cheek,
and from the fields the Easter-psalms ring high.

Detlev von Liliencron

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TERRAMARE OFFICE



IN southern countries the sun may be a tyrant and an affliction; in northern countries he is always a blessing and a benefaction and the return of the sun is the great joy-feast of nature's year. The winter in northern regions is long and hard; not without its beauties. There is, for instance, the incredible loveliness of a wood in hoarfrost, with every twig of every tree outlined according to its nature, from the rugged masses of the oaks, still hung with last year's leaves, to the solitary uprightness of the poplars and the slim crinolines of the weeping willows. Wonderful are the opalescent tints hanging over the shores of a frozen lake when the sun is dipping at four o'clock of a winter afternoon: but towards the end of February, when all glory has faded and waned into ragged pools and ankle-deep slush, how gladly the Northerner accepts the first promise of a green leaf and the springing of the young grass as the year turns towards Easter and the great Feast of Awakening.

The German is a nature-lover; of his three great feasts, all brought over from pagan days, Yule, the feast of the green fir-tree in the fire-lit chamber, Easter,

the feast of the Rising Sun, Whitsuntide, the feast of the young birch-trees and the coming of summer, it is Easter that has gathered the largest garner of legend and folk tradition.

Germany is a remarkable country. In its more isolated nooks, the country people are of a primitive conservatism which is wonderful for the preservation of folk tradition and folk customs. Whether it be the South Germans jubilating because the swallows have returned to their nests under the eaves or the peasants of the great marches of East Prussia listening to the storks building in the great wheels provided for the support of the nest on the roof, they rejoice alike in the sign that the world is awakening from the death-sleep of winter—and from north to south the children begin to collect sticks and branches for the Easter bonfires. Easter is as much a children's festival as Christmas. Not a child but looks forward to its Easter eggs. In Westphalia, the children used to believe that a stork or a fox brought them, in other regions it was the cock or the cuckoo; but now, all over Germany, the little children watch for the Easter Hare with his basket of eggs on his back. No-one knows how this tradition arose. Some trace a connection between Ostara, goddess of Spring, the same whom the Venerable Bede mentions as Eostræ, or Easter, and some far-off Egyptian Venus to whom the hare, the symbol of fruitfulness, was sacred. Certain it is that these ancient peoples used to present each other with eggs dyed scarlet at Eastertide—and red is still the favourite colour for the eggs the young German girls present to the young men to buy themselves off from a cut with the "Easter cane". A few years ago a benevolent Berlin municipality wanted to make sure that the German child in lean days should have his Easter egg, and sent out Park officials under cover of darkness to hide eggs under the bushes



CAROL SINGING AT EASTER,
a Custom among the Protestant Peasants in the Spreewald

in the public parks. In German cities, the great bulk of the population live in flats; but this does not prevent the children hunting their Easter eggs in the open. In every little allotment garden in the outskirts of the cities you will see happy children on Easter morning hunting for the eggs that devoted fathers and big brothers have carefully secreted a few hours earlier.)

(But the Easter observances begin long before Easter Sunday. Formerly, on Palm Sunday, Catholic towns used to hold a religious procession at the head of which a figure, dressed to represent Christ, was led through the streets mounted on a wooden ass. In some of the old churches the "Palm-esel" is still preserved, but the custom of the procession has died out. On Palm Sunday, however, the last of the family to appear at the breakfast-table is greeted with cries of "Palm donkey" and must submit to this title for the rest of the day.)

In Rippoldsau, in the Black Forest, poles several feet in height, decorated with pussy willow, coloured ribbons and a heart or a cross, are set up before the houses and afterwards carried to the church to be blessed. Not only the willow buds and the young green leaves greet the softer winds of Easter. In the woods the "March beakers" appear, the large wood snowdrops, growing in swampy thickets in fields of fragrant white and sometimes thrusting their heads out of a belated fall of snow. Higher up in the dryer woods there are frequent patches of clear blue, as if reflected from the spring sky, the "Leberblümchen" or liverwort. The Alpine meadows are aglow with the delicate mauve of the lovely but poisonous wild crocus and more homely open meadows with the sweet tossing yellow heads of the "Key to Heaven" as the Germans call the long-stemmed primrose which looks like a dwarf polyanthus. In town gardens the forsythia is lovely with its masses of golden flowers without any leaves and the



Catholic Peasants holding their solemn Easter Ride

old flower women under their red sunshades offer masses of home-grown snowdrops and tulips among their foreign roses and lilies. But the country children keep Maundy Thursday, which is Green Thursday in Germany, by eating green vegetables for dinner and watch eagerly for the laying of Green Thursday eggs which keep fresh for a whole year. Such a blessed egg is a good thing to keep in one's pocket. It prevents ruptures, protects the house from being struck by lightning and brings rich harvests. You plough an egg into the first furrow, anyhow; and it is particularly effective to choose an "Antlassei" or Green Thursday egg. If the egg has been eaten, you can burn the shell and mix the ashes with the seed corn; the eggs laid on Good Friday will put out a house on fire and are also good for discovering witches.

The ancient custom of washing poor men's feet on Maundy Thursday was faithfully observed by the late

Emperor Franz Josef of Austria, who washed the feet of twelve poor but worthy ancients every Maundy Thursday. They were then feasted and sent home with rich presents.

Lovers of the picturesque can note a solemn and beautiful observance on Good Friday in Munich and many another German city. The high altar is draped in purple cloth and secret doors beneath are thrown open, disclosing the body of Christ in a coffin of glass, lit by dim lamps. A constant stream of worshippers passes reverently before this spectacle, a lovely awe upon the children's faces. An egg, as symbol of the resurrection, was formerly placed in the tomb.

Journeying by train through the German landscape on Easter Saturday, you may see one peasant woman after another, dressed in her picturesque Sunday costume, going across the fields bearing a basket hung with ribbons and covered with a white cloth. These women are on their way to church to have their Easter food blessed—eggs, butter, perhaps a cake. The men-folk are busy on Easter Saturday building up the Easter fires which are to flame on every hill-top. Many villages guard their fires jealously, lest a rival village or mischievous youths set the beacon ablaze prematurely. The blazing fire is anxiously watched, for the fields the smoke sweeps over are assured of a good harvest. When the fires die down, the youths leap over them and the ashes are gathered to strew on field and garden. As the hare and the Easter egg are said to be sacred to Ostara, so the Easter fires, which should be built of his own oak, are said to be in honour of Donar or Thor, the red-haired paladin who has slain the Giant Winter with his great hammer and in whose fires red-haired animals, squirrels and foxes, were formerly sacrificed. The last trace of the sacrifice



Easter Ride to the Monastery of Marienstern in Saxony



Porch of a Saxonian Peasant Home, decorated for Easter

is the Easter bone-burning which is still a feature of the beacons in some parts of the country.

A gloriously picturesque variant of the Easter fire are the Easter wheels which are set rolling down the height that rises behind the village of Lügde, near Bad Pyrmont. These wheels represent perhaps the most ancient of all the Easter customs, portraying, as they do, the living wheel of the sun. They are massive affairs of oak, each weighing nearly half a ton. For days before, the Brotherhood of the Wheel go from house to house all over the neighbourhood collecting straw to fill the wheels. At midday on Easter Sunday, the wheels and straw are drawn in procession through the village and up on to the Easter Hill. Here much remains to be done. A strong stake must be driven into each side of each wheel to steady it in its mad downward course. Withy withes are cut and twisted into suppleness to bind the straw into sheaves. The great wheels are stuffed with as much straw as possible. When all is prepared, the brotherhood return to the town and their Easter feast, leaving only a couple of watchmen on the hill. At last twilight comes. The entire population, reinforced by many strangers, assembles at the foot of the hill. Shots give the signal for the departure of the first wheel. The straw flames up, pitchforks drive the wheel on its fiery course. It sways from side to side, always thrust back into its path by the long stakes at its sides. At first it stumbles clumsily along, then it rolls faster and faster, takes a wild spring over a break in the hillside, rights itself, sprays out a very rain of sparks and rolls thunderously on, leaving a long glowing ribbon of light behind it. At last it lands and the brethren rush to free the precious wheel from the last remnants of burning straw. For the wheel is a valuable possession. Well-treated, it lasts for twenty or thirty years. Now and then, of course, a new one must be provided. Decked with



"Fetching Water" on Easter Sunday

wreaths of flowers and furnished with a motto, the new wheel of the sun is solemnly installed among its fellows. The last new wheel, in 1930, was accompanied by the motto:

Once on a time, the wheel a-turning
For Lady Ostara was set burning,
But now, a Christian wheel, I bring
The news of Christ's awakening.

Everyone knows that you must rise before sunrise on Easter morning and bathe in Easter dew; then you will be beautiful and no ill will befall you for the rest of the year.

If this belief brings the young girls out of their beds, the boys get up before sunrise to see the sun dance. It is a belief widespread over the whole country that the sun gives three leaps for joy when he rises of an Easter morning; and I believe it, for I have seen the moon do it,



Easter Lambs

rising honey-coloured and huge out of an Alpine lake on a summer night. The scientist can no doubt explain the phenomenon of heavenly bodies leaping under certain atmospheric conditions when close to the horizon; but no explanation could destroy the magic thrill of the red sun leaping for joy on Easter day.

In Bavaria, bits of wood from the Easter fire are fashioned into little crosses and set up in the fields, in other parts of the country the charred wood is mixed with the water given the farm animals to drink at Eastertide.

Everywhere in Germany the custom of the Easter promenade, celebrated by Goethe in "Faust" is still observed. People go for a walk on Easter Sunday who scarcely stir from their dwellings at any other time of the year. The mixture of earnestness and playfulness in the famous "Osterspaziergang" is an inimitable rendering of the Easter spirit; it is visible in the fine description of early spring with which Faust's monologue opens:



Tracing ornamental Patterns on Easter Eggs
in the Spreewald

Freed now from ice are brook and channel
Through the power of the living Spring,
Green is the valley's promising,
Winter the old, grown weak and scrannel,
Back to his mountains wandering,
Fleeing, sends from his rocky fastness
Hail unavailing of granulate ice,
Cast in stripes o'er the greening vastness,
The impatient sun's quick sacrifice;
Who suffers no white in the building and yearning,
He would have all things with colour burning,
But his realm is lacking in flowers proud —
So he takes in their stead the dressed-up crowd. . . .

In most places, the hunting of the Easter eggs is by no means the end of the children's joy. Rolling them down hills is a very prevalent custom, taking place on Easter Monday or Tuesday. It is important that the egg should



A tiny Spreewald Maiden receiving her customary
Easter Presents

not break, and this is probably the origin of the custom of boiling them hard. Almost everywhere — in Bavaria and Westphalia, in Northern Germany and on the Rhine — we find the custom of egg duels. The two parties face each other holding their eggs by the large end — called in Baden the "angel". The two thin ends or "devils" then stab at each other and the egg which gets the first crack becomes the property of the victor. In the Palatinate, the loser is also penalized for his lack of skill by a smart smack. In the Nieder-Lausitz, children play a kind of marble game with their eggs, rolling them down a carefully-prepared gully in a small sandhill. Each pair of players makes its own mound and the egg which is hit and cracked by the one following again falls to the opponent.

In mediæval Bautzen it is the grown-ups who assemble on the Proitschenberg and trundle eggs, oranges and

cakes down the hill into the eager hands of hundreds of children. Each child has a bag strung round its waist to contain the booty. Some prefer to take their stand, armed with long-handled nets, on the shores of the Spree, where they fish the gifts that have gone wide out of the water.

The colouring of the eggs is a pleasant feature of pre-Easter days. In the country of the Wends, the watery villages of the Spreewald, the peasants preserve their habit of decorating their eggs with utmost elaborateness in beautiful and intricate traditional patterns. Some do this by tracing the patterns in melted wax before the egg is coloured, others by scratching the design in the shell, which requires a still more skilled and sensitive hand.

In parts of Saxony, Traunstein, Haid, Bautzen and many other towns we find the custom of the "Easter ride". The riders assemble in front of the church, drums and trumpets and salutes from guns give the signal to begin. Three times round the church the riders go, and then through the whole village, accompanied by their music. At the close, they again encircle the church three times and then dismount and attend the service.

In Bautzen the riders encircle their fields, again to ensure a plentiful harvest. The red and white flags of the church waving before them, dressed in black, wearing top-hats, a prayer-book in one hand and the bridle in the other, singing hymns as they go, they ride their heavy old farm horses which are decked out with ribbons, chains of flowers, shells and shining brass trimmings. Here, as elsewhere, the horses' manes have been rendered wavy by plaiting them up with straw for weeks before.

In Breslau we find the jolly custom of "Eierlesen", the race for the eggs. One competitor must deposit one hundred and one eggs at various places in the town and



WENDISH PEASANT CHILD WITH HER FIRST EASTER EGG



EGG-ROLLING AT BAUTZEN

Children wait in dense Crowds for the Easter
Gifts the grown-ups will roll down the Slope



A joyous feast is Eastertide!

then retrace his steps and collect them all, while his rival runs a long distance to a certain church, makes a certain mark on the door and then hastens back. The first to complete his task may claim the eggs as a reward. In some parts of the country the same competition is carried out on horseback.

A joyous feast is Eastertide, celebrating the return of flowers and the birth of young life.

Ethel Talbot Scheffauer, London

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